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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 000123

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2021
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CHAVEZ ON A BUMPY RIDE

REF: A. 05 CARACAS 3757
[1](#)B. 05 CARACAS 3262

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The Catholic hierarchy in Venezuela is trying to re-establish a working dialogue with President Hugo Chavez, but the efforts are riddled with problems. Emotions were gushing during the World Peace Day mass on January 8, attended by the Vice President and other senior GOV officials. The Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) subsequently elected a moderate archbishop as its new president, but goodwill was strained when Chavez objected to the bishops' January 11 statement lamenting "accelerated poverty" in the country. Retired Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara torpedoed the remaining geniality on January 14, when during a Barquisimeto religious festival he accused the GOV of establishing a Castro-style communist dictatorship in Venezuela. Chavez trained his rabid response on the rogue Cardinal, but demanded an official apology from Catholic hierarchy. After Church officials effectively capitulated, Chavez said he looks forward to a dialogue with the CEV on January 24. The Church says it is trying to keep its powder dry in case it is called upon to mediate a future political crisis, but it is also concerned over flagging GOV funding for religious schools as well as GOV plans to eliminate Catholic religious training from public schools. We doubt dialogue is what Chavez really wants from the Church, but rather a convenient punching bag in the absence of a political opposition. End summary.

Catholics Re-Institute World Peace Day Mass

[1](#)2. (C) The tumultuous new chapter in church-state relations began on January 8 during a World Peace Day mass offered by

Archbishop of Caracas Jorge Urosa. Papal Nuncio DCM Joseph Spiteri told poloff January 17 the special mass, a long-standing papal initiative to welcome the New Year, had not been celebrated for the last several years because of political crises. Archbishop Urosa, a moderate who was installed in November last year with the approval of President Hugo Chavez, revived the mass and invited senior GOV officials as a sign of good faith of the Church's desire to improve relations with the state (ref a). Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, Libertador Mayor Freddy Bernal, Metropolitan Caracas Juan Barreto, Human Rights Ombudsman German Mundarain and Controller General Clodosbaldo Russian attended the mass. Charge also attended with the diplomatic corps. Urosa warmly welcomed Rangel and the GOV officials during the mass.

CEV Elect Moderate, Criticize Poverty, Crime

13. (C) On January 9, during the annual assembly of the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV), bishops elected Maracaibo Archbishop Ubaldo Santana as the new conference president, replacing Merida Archbishop Baltazar Porras. Porras, a harsh and public critic of Chavez, had completed his second three-year term and, as is tradition, stepped down. The bishops chose Santana, Spiteri said, because of his reputation as a moderate. Nearly all senior CEV leadership changed, in fact, with the exception of Urosa, who is in his second term as the CEV's Second Vice President. Spiteri described the decision as an attempt by the Church to create new opportunities for dialogue with the government.

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14. (U) However, at the conclusion of the CEV assembly on January 11, the bishops issued their consensus "exhortation" in which they expressed worry over the direction of Venezuela's democracy. They cited the "unusual" results of the December 4 National Assembly elections, "widespread and deep" corruption, and costly GOV foreign assistance projects. Most notably, however, the bishops criticized the GOV for not taking steps to address the root causes of poverty in Venezuela, which they said had seen an "accelerated increase." President Chavez took the CEV to task on this last point during his January 13 State of the Union address before the National Assembly. Chavez argued that the episcopal statement was "far from the truth" and failed to recognize the positive results of GOV social programs such as Mision Robinson (literacy). Leaving the door open, however, Chavez said he had already called Archbishop Urosa to express his concerns and hoped to discuss them at length with the ecclesiastical leadership soon.

Cardinal Goes On Homiletic Rampage

15. (C) The still warm feelings were quickly chilled, however, when retired Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara (refs a and b) addressed a religious festival in Barquisimeto in Lara State on January 14. The procession of the "Virgin of the Divine Shepherd" is a popular commemoration of the miraculous end to a plague that afflicted Barquisimeto in 1856. This year's event was particularly important as it marked the 150th anniversary of the miracle. Lara Governor Luis Reyes Reyes, both a fervent Chavista and Catholic, had provided extraordinary support for the event, which Church officials say attracted up to two million visitors. The procession culminated in an outdoor mass in front of the church on Barquisimeto's central plaza, and counted on the attendance of Urosa, Santana, and Berlocco, as well as the town mayor. Spiteri, who was present at the mass, said organizers had invited Cardinal Castillo to deliver the homily as the most senior Catholic priest (though retired) in Venezuela.

¶6. (C) Castillo proceeded to unleash an explosive litany of government wrongdoings, accusing the government of establishing a Cuba-style dictatorship while permitting rampant corruption and widespread violation of human rights. Spiteri said Castillo's sermon, which was written in advance, likened the Chavez administration to the plague that once afflicted the town. While getting some applause at first, said Spiteri, some people started to yell, "Mass! Mass!", as an injunction to get on with the service and leave the politics aside. At this, the (Chavista) Barquisimeto mayor left the mass, and a National Guard color guard around the Divine Shepherd statue withdrew (there were unconfirmed press reports that the guardsmen cut the power to the Cardinal's microphone). Two bishops had to intervene with the Cardinal as he spoke, pointing out that people were starting to leave in protest. "Let them leave," the Cardinal reportedly said over the microphone. Spiteri said the Papal Nuncio spoke after the Cardinal finished, trying to re-focus the mass and ease the tension created by Castillo.

Chavez Demands Church Apology

¶7. (C) Acting incensed, Chavez blasted the Cardinal during his weekly Sunday television broadcast on January 15, calling his comments "shameful" and "horrible." Chavez said the Cardinal's charged homily could have started a violent riot among the 500,000 people in attendance (Note: The day's events probably saw two million participants, though the mass on the plaza drew 500,000). The President said Urosa and Santana had called Vice President Rangel to express their

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"sorrow" over the event. Chavez said he spoke with Berlocco and questioned whether the bishops were truly caught unaware by the Cardinal's sermon. Chavez said private apologies were inadequate for such an act, and demanded an apology from "the Catholic hierarchy" on behalf of Castillo. Spiteri said none of the Catholic authorities would issue a formal apology. Most senior Church officials, however, made public statements distancing themselves and the Church from the retired Cardinal. Urosa gave a press conference January 16, for example, calling Castillo's comments "inconvenient and inopportune" and strictly the personal opinion of the Cardinal. Chavez quickly applauded these and similar statements from other Church leaders as an official rebuke of Castillo. A few political opposition groups, most notably Alianza Bravo Pueblo, came out in support of the Cardinal.

¶8. (C) Chavez continued his two-pronged approach of entice and attack on January 17, when his office released a statement that the President had accepted a meeting with CEV leadership for January 24, with the intention of "maintaining a climate of trust and mutual respect." Earlier in the day, however, Chavez in a televised address lashed out against CEV ex-president Porras after the latter claimed to have saved Chavez' life during the April 2002 near-coup. Chavez, who routinely differs with the archbishop over what happened that critical night of April 11, said that Porras was lying and was, in fact, complicit with the coupsters. Chavez denied he had sought Porras' forgiveness that night, and said he now only asks God to "forgive them, for they know not what they do."

What the Church Wants

¶9. (C) Spiteri said the Church's moderate position served a two-fold purpose. First, if the Church must serve in the capacity of mediator during some future political crisis, he said, then it must not be identified with one particular side. Under previous leadership, he added, the Church was viewed as being close to the opposition. Second, Spiteri said the Church has become increasingly worried about the

future of its own religious and social programs. Specifically, he said the GOV's recent announcements it would seek to establish a "lay educational system" meant that Catholic religious instruction in public schools was at-risk. Spiteri also said the GOV increasingly viewed private schools as superfluous, resulting in deep budget cuts for the Catholic-run schools under the "Fe y Alegria" ("Faith and Happiness") program.

Comment

¶10. (C) We doubt Chavez sincerely wants a dialogue with the Church but rather a mechanism to neutralize its political and moral power. Chavez is always wary of the Church because it consistently garners higher popularity numbers among the public (which is markedly Catholic despite political affiliation). Additionally, absent a strong opposition, Chavez needs a "domestic enemy" he can use as a punching bag when it suits him. He will likely try to keep the Church on the ropes, relying on over-the-top statements from the more vocal clergyman such as Castillo and Porras as pretexts for attacks. Castillo's homily was probably a bit much and may have cost him some credibility, but he remains one of the few remaining Church leaders willing to take on the GOV directly. The Caracas Archbishop, traditionally viewed as Venezuela's senior priest, is so far a disappointment; he is seemingly bent on accommodation, which makes it easy for the Cardinal to upstage him. We also note that the Church's agenda of seeking additional funds for education from Chavez, who is currently oozing money, may conflict with the Church's role

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as Venezuela's social conscience.

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